

Overcoming Speech Anxiety

Top Ten Ways to Conquer Your Fear of Public Speaking:

1. **Figure out what scares you.** Investigate your fears by making a list of the specific things that make you feel anxious or afraid. Then make a corresponding list of ways you can cope with or address these fears.
2. **Breathe deeply.** Practice breathing deeply and slowly. Think yoga style—breathe deeply while you're practicing, before you go on stage, and during your speech. You can also try the "calming sigh" exercise: Inhale deeply, then let out a vocalized sigh as you exhale.
3. **Warm up your body before speaking.** Exercise reduces tension and helps you concentrate. Getting a little bit of physical activity before your speech will calm you and help you get rid of excess nervous energy. Try taking a walk outside, doing arm circles, or stretching gently.
4. **Practice.** Formal practice before a speaking event will help you feel more confident about what you're going to say and how you'll say it. But informal practice in social situations (talking in class, speaking to people you don't know at a party, etc.) will also help you conquer some of your speaking anxiety and fears.
5. **Visualize success.** Picture yourself succeeding and having fun. Close your eyes and do a mental rehearsal of your speech once or twice before you deliver it.
6. **Get enough sleep and have a good breakfast.** It's important to take good care of yourself and follow your morning rituals before a speaking event. Don't drink coffee if you're not a coffee drinker (or if you're a regular coffee-drinker, make sure to get that daily cup the day of your big speech). Being rested will also help you feel less anxious.
7. **Visit the space ahead of time.** Get as many details as you can about the room, the audience, the equipment, your time constraints, etc. Do you need a watch, or is there a big clock at the back of the room? Will you have a podium? Where will the audience be around you? Is someone going to introduce you or will you need to introduce yourself? If you're speaking on a panel, find out about the set-up, etc.
8. **Play the Worst Case Scenario game.** What's the worst thing that could happen? What will you do if that does happen? Often, even the worst possible situation isn't as bad as you think.
9. **Take the pressure off yourself.** Very rarely does anyone give a completely perfect speech. Even the President of the United States has room to improve when it comes to public speaking, and your audience will understand if you make mistakes. Think of every speech you give, and the mistakes you make, as a stepping stone toward becoming a more effective speaker.
10. **Visit an Oral Communication Tutor (OCT)!** Our OCTs hold office hours seven days a week and will tutor all undergraduate and graduate students at Stanford. Tutors can videotape you, offer feedback and advice, and can even meet with you consecutively as you work to brainstorm, organize, and practice a speech. And it's free! Visit <http://speakinghelp.stanford.edu> to schedule an appointment.

Why Public Speaking is Not So Scary

Here are some common public speaking fears and ways to overcome them:

- **Myth:** The audience hates me.
Fact: Most of the time, the audience *wants* you to succeed. Sometimes you may have one or two people in the audience who are frowning, but it's important not to take this too personally. And if someone asks you a hostile question during Q&A, first acknowledge and clarify the question, then respectfully state your answer or opinion. Remember that some people simply come across as more abrupt or unfriendly than they mean to.
- **Fear:** My PowerPoint will crash.
Solution: Yes, there's a good chance it *will* crash. PowerPoint is not reliable, but all hope is not lost. Have a backup plan—handouts, overheads, etc. Practice with them. The audience will appreciate your ability to recover with grace and keep the presentation moving despite technical difficulties.
- **Fear:** I have nothing interesting to say, and the audience will be bored by my presentation.
Solution: First, remember that you deserve to be heard. Using your voice to share something with the world is one of the most powerful tools you have. Next, choose a topic that excites you—if you're excited, your audience will likely stay engaged in your talk. Work on verbal and nonverbal strategies for engagement, such as eye contact, vocal variety, gestures, and movement. Share examples that are relevant and meaningful to your specific audience. The more you tailor your speech to the audience, the more they will listen and stay involved.
- **Fear:** I'll forget everything that I wanted to say.
Solution: Practice. It's said that practice doesn't necessarily make things perfect, but it does make them permanent. With lots of it, you'll at least remember what you want to say! Also, use key word outlines to keep you on track. If you get stuck, *don't panic*. Instead, stop, breathe, look at your notes, and get back on track.
- **Fear:** I'll run out of time or I'll finish way too early.
Solution: Practice with a stopwatch. Do this often enough that you get a sense of timing. Have a clock with you during your speech and note to yourself specific places in your speech where you will check the clock to see how you're doing. You can also rehearse how you would cut down your speech if you find yourself running low on time. Knowing this will reduce your anxiety. If you finish early, you can answer questions or share an extra anecdote or example.
- **Myth:** People can't understand me because I talk too quickly or too softly when I'm nervous.
Fact: You're right—speaking too quickly or softly makes it hard for your audience to understand you. Deep breathing is crucial, both for minimizing anxiety and for supporting a clear, loud voice. Practice speaking to the back of the room and picture your voice as a powerful laser that you can aim at all corners of the room. Consciously insert pause and breaths into your speech by marking them in your notes. Remember that silence is a powerful rhetorical tool that serves you as well as your listeners, who need time to digest what you're saying.
- **Fear:** I will say the wrong word, forget a section of my speech, or do something embarrassing.
Solution: Number your note cards so they'll be easy to put back in order if you drop them. Wear clothes and shoes in which you feel comfortable, and eliminate distractions like jingly jewelry, keys in pockets, pens you click, or hair you twirl. Anticipate possible disruptions and do what you can to prevent them.

Brought to you by the Oral Communication Program at the Center for Teaching and Learning

<http://speakinghelp.stanford.edu>

(see other side for more great advice!)